Life vest needed for technology gone overboard

JIM CARROLL
DIGITAL SURVIVOR

While attending a recent health and safety conference, I noticed the tremendous amount of attention being given to the idea of "wellness in the workplace."

It's a hot issue. Spend any time in the world of human resources and you'll realize that the phrase "work-life balance" has become one of the biggest issues that companies are dealing with. Yet what seems to be missing from a lot of the talk is how we ensure work-life balance in the digital age.

People are rapidly sinking under the weight of too much connectivity. They are dragging around laptops, cellphones, pagers and handheld devices. Internet access is sprouting up in cafés, supermarkets, and local corner stores. Meanwhile, people have home computers that are linked to corporate networks.

We are truly in a period where people can be connected anywhere at any time — and therefore work anywhere at any time.

There is a very disturbing aspect to all this technology, epitomized by the fact that 39 per cent of people polled in a recent survey by Wirthlin Worldwide said they would answer their cellphone in the bathroom.

Is there something wrong here?

People and companies are going overboard with their adoption of technology. Aside from the fact that we need to learn to unplug on a regular basis, there needs to be more discussion in the corporate sector about what we need to do to ensure proper use of these tools.

It's a timely topic. We now live and work in a hurried technology-based world, and people are feeling the implications.

A recent University of Chicago study asked people if they felt "rushed," and 30 per cent of the respondents said "always," while another 53 per cent said "sometimes." A mere 17 per cent said "rarely" — and most of those people were retired. The survey's conclusion is alarming: 41 per cent indicate that when they come home from work they feel exhausted, an increase of 15 per cent from 1989.

The fact is, digital technology makes it difficult to escape the world of work, even though technology was supposed to lead us to the age of leisure by doing much of the work for us.

Another recent study emphasized just how much we're working. It found that 43 per cent of managers work 51 hours a week or more; 33 per cent work 51 to 60 hours a week or more and 10 per cent work 61 hours or more.

Managers are looking for guidance. According to a survey by Citigate Technology, an IT public relations firm, 70 per cent of senior managers in IT companies consider balancing their work and home lives to be their biggest personal challenge.

Obviously, many are worried about how technology is encroaching upon their personal time, and are looking for insight into how they can cope.

That's why companies should be carefully assessing how far they want to go with connectivity.

First, they need to learn the business case of digital balance. We run the risk of creating an entire generation of burned out digital junkies. Indeed, studies and reports indicate that individuals who better manage their time and learn to divorce their personal time from their work time reduce their stress, improve their health, and end up having a happier and more enriching life. Employees are far more productive if they're not burned out and stressed out.

Thirty-nine per cent of people polled in a recent survey said they would answer their cellphone in the bathroom.

Companies need to take the time to understand why work-life balance is so important, and from that, realize that they need to give their staff some digital-free space.

Companies also need to assess the corporate culture in light of all these toys. There's an attitude that many employees should be plugged in at all times, ready to go. Yet an organization should question whether this is absolutely necessary for all staff — and set parameters for workers. It should be culturally acceptable to unplug.

Finally, organizations should be prepared to examine new work models, including telecommuting and office hoteling, in order to use technology to help give staff some down time.

People shouldn't be afraid to become modern-day Timothy Learys, tuning out now and then.

Jim Carroll is co-author of Light Bulbs to Yottabits: How to Profit by Understanding the Internet of the Future.

jcarroll@jimcarroll.com